

Making it happen: Sustaining a commitment for reading success

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In this extract, Whitfield and Moore present some thoughts for literacy coaches to consider based on their experiences that are supported by research.

Promoting collegial dialogue is one way to help maintain and increase momentum toward student success (Hasbrouck & Denton, 2005). Collegial dialogue refers to the process of effectively and frequently discussing research-based instructional strategies and expected student outcomes. Communicating clearly and regularly about assessment measures, results, and consequences is necessary. Building each teacher's capacity to use a variety of assessments to monitor student understanding, strategy use, and achievements provides for deeper insights on what he or she can do.

The use of results can keep the focus on preventing reading failure. Look ahead at the next assessment and become informed as to what students must have developed in order to show growth, maintain growth, or stay out of the at-risk categories. Ask your teachers to reflect on the learning path they have outlined and check to see that it will align with the next outcome measure.

Use your interpersonal skills to focus conversation on open and honest discussions about teaching. Be clear about what, from your perspective, needs to change and what you hope or expect to change. Plainly state how you see things, and invite your colleagues to do the same. Use active listening skills to show sincere interest in another point of view (Carnegie, 1981). Use questioning strategies that foster curiosity, and inquiry: How can we solve the issue? Throughout this ongoing search for the common ground between what each wants, making all decisions based on what is best for the students. Engaging in professional inquiry on topics such as how best to address the standards for each student and empowering teachers to become problem solvers are paramount to success.

Key Questions: Are you engaging in collegial dialogue where everyone involved feels that their professional empowerment has been enhanced? Do you initiate inquiry?

Continual professional development is an important factor in providing academic rigour and strategic teaching. Careful planning based on student need should be done to provide effective professional development training that offers knowledge of research-based instructional practices for teachers. Remember that information does not make change happen (Henderson, 2001). Follow these training sessions with classroom modelling and observations of teacher implementation. Help teachers reflect on their teaching strategies by constantly evaluating the impact of instruction on student success. Due to time constraints, we often cut short the training that needs to take place (Moore, 2004). Providing ineffective, too brief training is actually far worse than conducting no training at all. It sends the message that the change or the focus isn't all that important. If it were, the training would not seem rushed and crammed into such a small window of time.

Key Questions: Are you planning professional development based on student needs? Are you allocating enough time to important training?

Collegial fellowship outside of the immediate school setting is also important to assist in the professional growth of teachers. It's an old saying, but extremely applicable here, that "It's difficult to be a prophet in your own land." Hearing other implementation successes or endeavours is encouraging and motivating to everyone. When teachers know that the same strategies are encouraged and implemented on other campuses, it adds credence to their own literacy leader's suggestions or professional nudges.

You must be influential to succeed. The ability to change the ways or mindsets of others begins with the capacity to change yourself. Small changes can have a dramatic effect on the lives of those around you (Hasbrouck & Denton, 2005). Pursue your own growing professionalism to model professional growth to others.

Consider organising a schoolwide event, perhaps after school or on a Saturday, featuring a leader in education. Check with local college facilities and stay in the loop about their guest speakers. If none are available, organise your own book study with, perhaps, an online guest author chat.

Encourage active membership in local literacy organisations. Be the effective link that your teachers need so they can have access to information about attending conferences, reviewing commercial products, and "staying up" with reading of professional literature. Teachers must learn to develop their own professional voice, and you can help.

Key Questions: Are you modelling your active professional membership? Are you influencing others to grow professionally?

Schools provide a perfect environment to create reform by promoting a shift in thinking about assessment, curriculum, and professional issues. If there are issues preventing forward progress, what encouragement can we offer to critically analyse what stands in the way? What skills do your teachers have that can give clear articulation or demonstration to a promising practice? Are you encouraging leadership on local curriculum teams? Do you invite other professionals outside your building to conduct focused observations or learning walks of classroom practices? Do you encourage visits to other campuses?

As literacy leaders we have the ability to make a positive difference in the lives of our teachers and students. Remember that each teacher is both the head and the heart of the classroom. They are the decision makers and the creative energy, and they are ultimately responsible for helping each and every child succeed. No scientific research recommends supplanting the classroom teacher with a commercial program (Garan, 2000). As a literacy leader, your job is to evoke passion and perpetual growth so that every teacher achieves student success.

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